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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000663

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/28/2029  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: GBRV STEPS UP ATTACKS ON PRESS IN MAY

REF: A. CARACAS 595  
[1](#)B. CARACAS 546 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) accelerated its attacks on independent media outlets and journalists in May. President Chavez threatened to close opposition-oriented cable news network Globovision, and government officials raided the home of Globovision President Guillermo Zuloaga, ostensibly to investigate the origin of over twenty cars parked there. Senior GBRV officials publicly threatened a well-known Caracas journalist after he reported on the privileged lifestyle of a pro-government mayor. Chavez and other senior GBRV officials publicly rejected the UN and OAS Rapporteurs for Press Freedom's recent criticism of the GBRV. A few thousand Venezuelans marched in support of press freedom on May 20 and May 27, but the political impact of both marches was limited. Chavez's transfer of the media regulatory body to his close confidant Diosdado Cabello portends further efforts by thin-skinned GBRV officials to intimidate the local media. End Summary.

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ATTACKS ON THE RISE  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) The media watchdog NGO "Espacio Publico" (Public Space) released alarming statistics May 5 indicating that during the first two months of 2009, 47 journalists were either attacked or had their individual rights violated in Venezuela. This figure represents 71% of all the attacks registered in 2008 (66 victims). While presenting the data to members of the press, Espacio Publico director Carlos Correa referred to the spike in attacks as "very serious" accusing President Chavez of "permitting the attacks, and allowing impunity to function as a deterrent to filing charges, which in turn leads to more attacks."

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GLOBO HACKED; CHAVEZ THREATENS  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) President Chavez threatened to close opposition-oriented television news network Globovision during the May 10 broadcast of his weekly "Alo, Presidente" talk show (Ref A). Referring to Globovision's coverage of a minor earthquake, President Chavez publicly accused the private media of "inciting hate, even war," and warned them "not to make a mistake because they are playing with fire."

The pre-text for Chavez's threat was based on Globovision's May 4 broadcast of U.S. Geological Survey seismic data as well as reporters assertions that GBRV authorities were unavailable for comment. There are currently at least three pending GBRV investigations against the network. The network used the U.S. data after Venezuelan government sources could not/did not immediately provide the information to reporters.

¶4. (C) Unidentified persons hacked into Globovision's website May 6 by a group referring to themselves as "hackers for liberty". The group of hackers posted an anti-Government message on the network's website, which was restored to its original content within hours of the cyber incident. The message criticized the GBRV for censoring TV stations, undermining democracy, and holding political prisoners. The hackers also urged students to take to the streets in protest against President Chavez. Some media pundits privately speculate the hacking was done by government supporters in an attempt to discredit Globovision.

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HOME OF GLOBO PRESIDENT RAIDED  
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¶5. (SBU) Police officials from the Scientific, Criminal and Criminology Investigative Police (Cicpc), and officials from the Venezuelan Customs and Tax Administration Service (Seniat) and the Institute for the Defense of People in the Access to Goods and Services (Indepabis), jointly raided the Caracas home of Globovision President Guillermo Zuloaga during the evening of May 21. Media reports indicated that in addition to being a private home, the residence is also used as the administrative headquarters of Toyoclub, a Toyota dealership also owned by Zuloaga. During the evening raid,

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the police seized more than 20 cars for further inspection. Zuloaga told the media May 22 that the vehicles are all legally owned and registered by either Globovision or his Valencia based car dealership, insisting the raid is merely another example of government harassment against the media.

¶6. (SBU) The raid occurred within hours of a harshly worded May 21 statement issued by the NGO Human Rights Watch calling on the GBRV to end its persecution of Globovision. During the televised May 22 opening of a chapter of the Armed Forces University in Barinas, President Chavez said, "Some house, property of a filthy rich (individual), filled with luxury cars, and they did not produce any documents. Go and defend yourselves in court. If I have 40 cars, I should explain why I have them." Chavez added, "And what does the bourgeoisie say? Surprise, surprise! The owner of the house is also the owner of a TV channel.. They say that Chavez is chasing them. Impunity must end here!"

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MAYOR THREATENS JOURNALIST  
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¶7. (SBU) The pro-government mayor of the Libertador borough of Caracas, Jorge Rodriguez, threatened opposition oriented journalist Nelson Bocaranda May 8 following publication of Bocaranda's column reporting on the PSUV mayor's privileged lifestyle. Bocaranda, who has previously published investigative stories against members of Rodriguez's extended family on corruption allegations, released the name of the wealthy neighborhood where the Rodriguez's three children take swimming classes. In reaction, Mayor Rodriguez filed charges against Bocaranda stating, "This is personal... If something happens to my children, there will be no sewer where he (Bocaranda) can hide because I will look for and find him."

¶8. (SBU) Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro announced May 11 that legal action would be taken against Bocaranda for

"starting a smear campaign against the family of Rodriguez." He referred to the journalist as "An assassin with the pen." Parroting Maduro, PSUV National Assembly Deputy Carlos Escarra told reporters "We are going with everything we have against Nelson Bocaranda. We will pursue him under the rocks until he learns to respect the Venezuelan family." Former mayor of the El Hatillo borough of Caracas, Alfredo Catalan, and his brother Hector Catalan (who also have pressed charges against Bocaranda) filed a request with the court to "Prevent Bocaranda from leaving the country" prior to a hearing date of June 8 for defamation of character.

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UN/OAS CONCERNED; CHAVEZ REACTS  
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¶9. (SBU) The United Nations (UN) Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Frank La Rue, and the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Catalina Botero, issued a joint statement May 22 expressing concern over comments by senior GBRV officials against Globovision and other privately owned media outlets in Venezuela. In particular, the joint press release warned against the current "atmosphere of intimidation in which the right to freedom of expression is seriously limited." The UN and OAS rapporteurs called on the GBRV "to maintain in full effect the right to freedom of expression established in international instruments adopted by the State, and to adequately protect international guarantees in the proceedings taking place against privately owned media outlets and in particular against Globovision."

¶10. (SBU) Local media reported May 24 that Chavez reacted strongly to the international criticism by the OAS and the UN. During President Chavez's weekend visit to Ecuador he told reporters, "What's the OAS for?" Chavez further suggested that South America should set up its own separate arbiters of human rights saying, "enough already with their imposing all this on us from the North." Local media also gave prominent coverage of the May 23 reaction of Venezuela's ambassador to the Organization of American States, Roy Chaderton, who accused the Globovision TV network of "media terrorism". Newspapers reported widely on Chaderton's claim that foreign observers are passing judgment on Venezuela and are beholden "to the interests of the private media."

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RCTV - BACK TO THE FUTURE  
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¶11. (SBU) The Director of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), Marcel Granier, filed suit before the Supreme Court of Venezuela on May 22 requesting that the GBRV return confiscated technical equipment, antennas, transmitters and cameras, and reinstate the station's ability to broadcast on the open airwaves. Currently the seized equipment is being used by other pro-Government stations. Despite mass demonstrations in 2007 in support of the network, the once highly popular RCTV, was suspended from the free public airwaves in 2007 following Chavez's refusal to renew its broadcast license. RCTV is currently only able to broadcast in Venezuela on closed cable networks to paid subscribers. Relatively small street demonstrations in support of RCTV and Globovision occurred in Caracas on both May 20 and May 27.

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GBRV GEARS UP FOR FURTHER MEDIA SCRUTINY  
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¶12. (C) Chavez's May 15 decision to transfer authority of the GBRVs media regulatory body (CONATEL) to the Department of Public Works bodes poorly for media freedom in Venezuela. The bureaucratic restructuring of Conatel places it squarely

under the authority of close Chavez confidant and cabinet minister Diosdado Cabello. The new authority of Cabello, who as recently as May 17 promised to end "radio's latifundio," is likely to further politicize any investigations against any media outlets that are bold enough to criticize the Government. The restructuring of Conatel's chain of command, when coupled with the May 12 publication in the official registry announcing the hiring of inspectors for future investigations of radio and TV stations across the country, clearly serve as ominous premonitions for the days ahead.

CAULFIELD